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ABSTRACT

The first portion of this paper discusses the procedure for placing freshmen in a remedial composition course at a small liberal arts college. The design of the basic skills test used for placement is criticized on the basis of the inappropriateness of both content and format (multiple choice) in determining which students required remedial writing instruction. The remainder of the paper describes the changes made at the college during a five-year period that include stricter admissions requirements, increased enrollment in the freshman remedial course, and an attempt to group remedial composition students based on basic skills test scores. Teaching techniques used in various sections of the course are mentioned, including frequent replacement of textbooks and having students read their writing aloud, participate in "community" composing of paragraphs and themes, and design and administer their own grammar tests. The general policies and grading procedures of the course's instructional staff are also explained. (AEA)

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DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Francesca M. Boerner

On the night before a new school quarter begins, I invariably have a dream. In the dream, I walk into my office and see on my desk a cassette recorder and a manila envelope. Having started the recorder, I begin leafing through the envelope. My chairman's voice drones in the background:

Good morning, Miss Boerner. The photograph you are looking at is of the 33 students who will be in your English 099-04 class this quarter. Because drop-add and late registration will be in effect one week, this number will no doubt fluctuate--probably higher. As always, these students will be of varying abilities. One will not know the letters of the alphabet; one will have to retrace each of the words she writes in order to "see" what she is committing to paper; still others will be unable to copy sentences accurately from board to paper or read with a minimum of competence; and finally, others will be as proficient as students enrolled in the regular freshman composition courses, but their poor test taking abilities have funnelled them into 099. The textbooks you requested three months ago through the bookstore have been delayed and are not due for an additional six weeks.

Your mission, Miss Boerner, which you have no choice but to accept, is to provide these students with the background in English grammar and mechanics necessary to successfully cope with college level English, or--after determining which students are not capable of pursuing college level work--recommend that they be dismissed from school. This tape will self destruct in ten seconds.

As the tape starts to self destruct, I wake with the sinking feeling that I should self destruct as well. This "mission impossible" format is not a dream; rather, it is the reality I face, along with the other English 099 instructors, at

West Georgia College.

What I would like to do this morning is describe our developmental program--English 099, the problems we face, and our attempts to cope with these problems individually and collectively. Then, with the time that remains, I hope you in turn will be willing to discuss your program, its problems, and--most importantly--the techniques you have implemented that could prove profitable to us all.

West Georgia College, a liberal arts school of approximately five thousand students, is traditionally known for its open door admissions policy. Until only the last year or two, virtually anyone who filled out an application form and sent in the ten dollar application fee gained admittance. That open door is slowly closing.

By a 1974 order of the Board of Regents, the Special Studies program including English 099, Math 099, Special Studies 090 (reading skills), and Special Studies 091 (study skills) was implemented.

At that time, there were no restrictions to admission. But, any student with below a 650 combined SAT score was required to take the Comparative Guidance and Placement Test (CGP)--a test developed by a national testing service. If the student scored below the established 44 cutoff on the English portion, he was placed in English 099. That fall of 1974, four English 099 classes were offered.

Through 1976, an open admissions policy was still in effect. The CGP cutoff, however, had been raised to 49.

The test was not a favorite among the 099 teachers, and when I joined the West Georgia faculty in 1977, the implementation of a new test--the Basic Skills Examination (or BSE) was in the making. The test had been developed by a committee of the Board of Regents, was copyrighted for state use, and was therefore inexpensive to administer. A cutoff score of 62 was deemed equivalent to the CGP 49 cutoff, and any entering student who did not meet the cutoff was placed in 099. That fall of

1977, 230 students were required to take English 099; seven 099 English courses were offered.

By the fall of 1979, the first real step toward tightening admissions standards went into effect.

Any student having below a 300 Verbal SAT score and below a 300 Math SAT score and below a 2.0 high school average was automatically rejected. Because a student can meet one of these three requirements and still be admitted, only twenty six have been rejected to date. But, it's a start.

In addition, any admitted student with below a 340 SAT Verbal must take the BSE test. If he reaches the 67 cutoff or above, he enrolls in the regular freshman composition sequence; if he doesn't reach the 67, then he heads into 099.

That fall of 79, 419 students needed English 099; nine English 099 classes were offered.

With the first administering of the BSE test in the fall of 1977, we found ourselves on the proverbial other side where the grass isn't really any greener. From our vantage point, it looked brown--and in my youthful enthusiasm I initiated a letter via our Special Studies Department to the Board of Regents and cosigned by my fellow instructors.

We weren't complaining so much about the test's format: sixty items, each item divided into lines A, B, C, with D "no error," and a forty five minute time limit; what bothered us were the "basic" skills being tested.

One item, for example, read

A. The diabolical villiany (sic) of
B. Iago in Shakespeare's Othello
C. has caused many viewers to question Shakespeare's humanity.
D. No error

The error was the incorrect spelling of villainy.

Another example read

A. For our convenience in examining the controversial
B. books, the librarian expeditiously seperated (sic) the fiction
C. from the non-fiction and then provided us with an annotated bibliography.
D. No error

The error here was the incorrect spelling of separated.

In addition to the types of items listed above which we did not feel were geared to the content of 099, we also felt some items had multiple answers.

For example,

A. The playwright's achievement as the most credible interpreter
B. of American life in the 1960's can be assessed only after
C. her works have endured time and criticism.
D. No error

The answer key indicates line "C" is the error because--we dedeuced--"her" cannot refer to the general "playwright." But, can't the item be correct since the pronoun and antecedent do agree? I certainly wouldn't want to tell Lillian Hellman she wasn't a "she."

Again,

A. If you look in the attic or the hall, in the
B. closet or the coal bin,
C. one certainly would not be surprised at whatever apparitions make themselves evident.
D. No error

Is the error where the reader first notices the shift in person--whereby the line where "one" appears is the error, or is the error the use of second person "you" which we discourage in formal writing?

Our third major area of concern was those items where a multiplicity of errors--all in one line-- was tested or the items had possible errors in all three lines.

For example,

A. Andrew Mathews broke his leg while
B. racing him motercycle (sic), nevertheless, he
C. managed to attend class most of the quarter.
D. No error

Line "B" which manages to bombard the reader with a pronoun case error, a misspelling of motorcycle, and a comma splice, is the error.

Another item read

A. The french blue velvet gown
B. was a perfect compliment (sic)
C. for Sally's blonde hair and blue eyes.
D. No error

Is line "A" the error? French isn't capitalized. Is line "B" the error? Compliment is spelled with an "li," not "le." Is line "C" the error? Shouldn't the preposition "for" instead be "to"?

These, then, were our basic problems in justifying Form I of the BSE. It spawned Form II almost immediately, our complaint there being the verbatim repetition of twenty two of the items from Form I.

Students who couldn't master basic concepts of grammar and mechanics were reaching the cutoff and using that as grounds for exiting the course. Some of the better students in terms of writing ability couldn't reach the cutoff and were being held back.

We also discovered that anyone who answered "B" to every one of the sixty items passed the cutoff score by one percentage point.

When it came to light that noone admitted to being on the original committee to draw up the tests, we were suspicious. Perhaps the most heartbreaking result, though, was the Board of Regents never answered our note or our offer to contribute

representative items we felt suitable.

My high school P.E. coach used to point out "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." The 099 instructors haven't quit, but we haven't won either. We're in much the same position as Germany in World War II: we're coming in second.

Much has happened in the last five years at West Georgia College.

The admissions standards are slowly being tightened. Whereas in 1974 there were no students denied admittance if their application forms were in order, in the fall of 1979, twenty six students were rejected because they could not meet the 300-300-2.0 entrance criteria. Studies are underway now for further tightening of standards to be put into effect for the fall of '81.

The 099 English cutoff score is being upgraded--and now stands at 67. Unfortunately, all this means is the sixty seventh percentile requires a student to get one third of the sixty items correct. Rumor has it the score will be upgraded again within the next year or two.

BSE Form I was finally destroyed, and in 1978 the English 099 instructors received a questionnaire containing a list of error types and were asked to rank them in order of seriousness. The request came through the West Georgia Special Studies Department, and we like to assume it was initiated in the Regents' office.

Form 8 appeared last spring. This one much more accurately reflects what we feel 099 students should be aware of: verb endings, comma splices, subject-verb agreement, run-ons, general word distinctions.

In addition, the test is now divided into three parts and three different formats. One part is the ABCD choose the line with the error format; a second returns to the CGP format where four parts of a sentence are underlined and the student must determine if one of those underlined parts is the error. The third part contains a sentence with a word or phrase left out; the student must select from four choices

the one which best fits into the blank.

Simply passing the exit test is no longer a guarantee of passing the course. In 1974, 75, and 76, the CGP test was offered at midterm and at the quarter's end. A student reaching the cutoff score at midterm was judged by some teachers to have completed course requirements and could disappear for the rest of the quarter. That was particularly disturbing to the other instructors since these students could head into English 101 solely on the basis of a grammar test which they considered a poor one at that.

Now the test we give, the BSE, is only offered once--at the end of the quarter--and, although making the cutoff is one of the requirements for exiting the course, the student's writing carries the principal weight in the course.

Enrollment continues to climb steadily. In fall of 1977, 230 students were required to take English 099; in fall of 1978, there were 350 students needing English 099; this past fall, 419 students required English 099.

The biggest problem we face at this time is making room for these students. The Board of Regents Special Studies Policy states, "Students having more than one Special Studies requirement may not enroll in regular academic courses." However, advisors of Special Studies students have found themselves registering students in courses such as psychology, art and music appreciation, sociology, and so forth when the 099 courses were closed out at registration.

This fall, we offered nine English 099 classes; we still turned away about fifty students needing 099--and this happened when the courses listed already had enrollments between twenty seven and thirty.

It's no wonder that students who can't get their 099 requirements in yet manage to maintain a GPA in regular classes resent having to back up to take English 099--which carries no GPA credit or credit toward graduation and which is often responsible for their being dismissed from school when they haven't successfully completed

the course requirements within the alloted three quarter span.

At West Georgia, we've made several collective and individual attempts to cope with the 099 classes and their large enrollments--due in part to the fact that the 099 students are allowed three quarters, and sometimes four, to complete the course requirements.

The state requires that all students scoring below the 340 SAT Verbal take the Basic Skills Exam; last year, we at West Georgia added to that a writing sample. Entering students required to take the BSE have several opportunities to do so. For example, a student entering in the Fall of 1978 had a chance in May, June, July, two chances in August, and one chance on the day preceding Fall Quarter registration to take the test. Upon completing the test, each student was asked to write one six to ten sentence paragraph answering one of a choice of four questions. These questions had been devised by the 099 instructors and included choices such as

What has been your most embarrassing moment?
Would you rather live in a small town or a large city?
How has learning to drive changed your life?
Why do so many teenagers start smoking?

The students were allotted twenty five minutes to complete the samples. Students needing 099 by virtue of their test scores (below the 67 cutoff) were grouped by the 099 instructors, after a holistic reading of their writing samples, as "high," "medium," or "low." The English 099 classes had been scheduled for two blocks of time, and a master list was drawn up after each testing session indicating which students were to take which section. The instructors had already decided which section would be geared to which level. For instance, 099-02 at 8:55 and 099-05 at 12:10 might cater to those students in the "high" range; sections 01 and 04 at 8:55 and sections 06 and 07 at 12:10 would be aimed at the "medium" level. We did not tell the students they were going to be grouped.

The grouping experiment was a dismal failure.

Sample paragraphs were "lost" between the time they were written and the time we received them. We solved this problem by having an 099 instructor proctor the samples and collect them on the spot. Our master lists were then relayed to the Special Studies office, where in the hustle and bustle of quarter breaks, administrative paperwork, and the like they were "misplaced." Finally registration day approached. Unfortunately, the tables were left unmanned at several points, and students simply picked any class card they wanted. We tried to rectify the situation by a mass drop-add handled by the English Department 099 instructors. The students were confused by the changes, "old timers" were distraught they weren't getting the teacher they had signed up for, and, on the whole, it appeared the English Department didn't know what it was doing. We were embarrassed to say the least by a system we thought would be beneficial all the way around, and we haven't had the nerve to try the same system since. We are still looking, though, for a system of grouping that would allow teachers to work with students at essentially the same level of ability rather than work with a class covering all levels and would place students in classes geared to their particular needs. Those requiring <u>basic</u> grammar and mechanics, such as learning when to capitalize letters and even what capital letters are, would not have to compete with students needing to focus primarily on writing style, thesis and support, and so forth. Any suggestions would be graciously accepted.

We order textbooks which vary quarter to quarter so a student taking 099 for the second or third time doesn't repeat a book. We select those textbook/workbook formats which provide numerous exercises covering the rules under discussion. We're always looking for new textbooks that could be considered.

We've tried various techniques within our own classes to help.

One of our instructors has instituted her own "Brave New World" and requires her students to sleep with their textbooks under their pillows. If all else fails, try osmosis!

Another one of our instructors combines reading and writing skills by having students read their paragraphs and theme assignments out loud to the rest of the class. Her argument is they so seldom hear "formal" English that they don't make the connection between hearing it and writing it. She hopes this type of exercise will help tune their ears to such problems as dropped word endings. Psychologically, this has a beneficial effect on the students. The work they read is often interesting and <u>good</u> because a listener can't hear comma splices, run-ons, misspelled words. They realize their ideas have value--and if they want that value to carry over into written work, then they should care enough about that work to polish it.

Still another one of our instructors has her students write "community" paragraphs and themes. For example, each student writes a topic sentence and then passes his paper to the next student. That student then adds a sentence of support, initials his sentence, and sends the blossoming paragraph down the line. In this way, students are taught the importance of staying focused on the topic sentence. When full length themes are involved, students also become aware of when to start new paragraphs, how to provide smooth transitions, and so forth. When the paragraphs or themes are completed, the papers go back to the student writing the starter sentence. His job is to correct/revise the sentences that night, turning in both the original and his polished version the following day.

A fourth instructor has individualized her class to a large extent. One day a week consists of basic lecture or explanatory information as needed; one day a week is always set aside as a writing day--paragraphs, themes, revisions, etc. The remaining three days students work in text books covering sections in an order determined by the instructor; they are responsible for taking and scoring the exercises, asking for help if needed, and taking a test on the material. Once a satisfactory score is attained, the student moves on to the next unit. Because of the large range of ability in our 099 classes, this method inspires the better students

to work toward exiting the course without being held back by the slower students, and the slower students can receive the extra help they need without feeling the whole class is waiting for them to catch up.

Although I individualize the work to some extent, I prefer a bit more structure in the day to day activities. Naturally I lecture, and much of what I say is placed on the board so students can visualize what they are hearing. I call on them to make up sentences which use the rules under discussion and then have them write those sentences on the board. Any corrections to be made are made as a class. I have them do a lot of reading out loud--to help them improve reading skills and to keep them alert.

The notion of test taking sends many of these students into a panic because they distrust teacher made tests composed of complicated sentences containing a myriad of grammatical problems, unfamiliar vocabulary, and tricky items. After all, it was a test which put them into 099 to begin with. In order to have the students feel they are an integral part of the class and can even be teachers too, each student is assigned the task of making up an individual test on a specific unit and swapping his test with a partner who has also made up one. After the student takes his partner's test, the test is returned to the original author who grades the test, confers with the student who took the test to explain why answers are right or wrong, and reports the results to me.

As of now, I'm making this assignment when a unit test can be constructed with the student circling or indicating a correct answer rather than having to rewrite a sentence. For example, tests which work well cover such areas as subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, pronoun case, word distinctions, and identifying fragments, comma splices, and run-ons. Punctuation tests are yet to come, but I already fear those results having a number of students who belong to the "If it contains a comma, it must be a comma splice" school of thought.

Students are given overall directions they must follow. These include the number of items to be included on the tests (generally twenty), that each sentence must have one clearly correct answer given as a choice. Depending on the unit being tested, additional helpful hints may be necessary--such as the fact that in drawup a subject-verb agreement test, the possible choices must consist of a singular and plural present tense verb form (many students tend to include instead a choice between present and past tense). Other than these types of pointers, students are on their own and can check with me if individual problems arise as they are constructing their tests.

Classes at West Georgia College meet daily, and students have two to three days outside of class to make up the test once a unit is completed and reviewed. One day of class time is needed for test taking, overnight the tests are corrected by the students, and students review their tests with each other the following day.

Students make two copies of each test: one serves as their answer key, the other as the graded test. I take both copies and check them when the students are finished. Students taking the tests are urged to comment on any items they feel do not fulfill the assignment--no right choice between two possible answers, etc.,--or items they feel have been incorrectly graded. Each student receives two grades: one for the test he made up, one for the test he took. With each test, the students work with new partners.

This system is by no means foolproof. There is always at least one student who does not show up with his test, and there are always students who show up with tests obviously not well constructed (many spelling errors, consistently short sentences using no imagination either to write or to answer, sentences copied directly from the workbook, directions completely ignored, and the like). Depending on the overall class results, I retain the option to give my own test to the students as a second

check. Otherwise, I urge the students scoring below seventy on any test to see me for extra help and usually a make up test of mine. All in all, though, the students generally seem to appreciate the chance to prove to me they understand the material at hand because they have worked with it and enjoy the "personal" content. The sentences provide writing practice since the student can express his ideas and work with writing styles closer to his level rather than the often too sophisticated sentences which show up in grammar books and workbook tests.

My overall objective with this is to force the students to take more of the initiative and responsibility for the course. For too long, the students have seen the teacher as the critic (generally negative at that) whose primary duty is to give grades--never mind that students earn them. They will not be able to write effective compositions if they cannot express themselves accurately. If they cannot convince a fellow student that they have the wherewithal to succeed, they then are often willing to approach me in a less defensive manner and ask for help. If they do convince a fellow student that they have a grasp of the material, for the most part that convinces me as well. It further makes for fewer excuses if on their compositions I have to mark errors they have been tested on and should know how to eliminate.

English 099 is taught almost exclusively by the six full time instructors at West Georgia College who agree on several standards we will all adhere to, and this year we are happy to have our first male instructor at the 099 level. Each teacher has a firm attendance policy which emphasizes the importance of students' being in class, each teacher has students writing five paragraph themes by the quarter's end similar to those written in the regular freshman composition sequence, each instructor recognizes the need for conferences with students to inform them on a more personal level of existing strengths, weaknesses, and general progress with the course, and--since each 099 instructor also teaches the regular freshman composition sequence--

we can generally agree on what proficiency a student should exhibit before exiting the course.

Writing assignments are marked and graded on an "S" or "U" basis (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory) since the final grades for the course are

(S) Satisfactory: student has successfully completed all the requirements for exiting and enrolls the following quarter in English 101.

(CP)Continue Progress: student has made progress throughout the quarter but has yet to complete all the requirements for exiting. For example, he may not have reached the writing level his teacher feels is necessary, or he may not have reached the BSE cutoff. He reenrolls in 099.

(U) Unsatisfactory: student has excessive absences, constitutes a discipline problem, or has not evidenced the ability to succeed in 101. He reenrolls in 099. Generally, those students receiving "U" for serious writing deficiencies are warned that they could eventually be dismissed from school and urged to seek counseling as to existing alternatives to higher education.

A "U" does not lead to a student's dismissal unless he has had the three quarter total permitted. In some cases, though, a third quarter student manages to persuade the Special Studies Chairman that he deserves one more chance and is enrolled for a fourth quarter of 099.

Finally, we all try to assume that every 099 student is a future 101 student--primarily because the students themselves believe it. Yet, when faced with a class of third timers and often some fourth timers, the prospect seems bleak.

We are fortunate to have a department chairman and a chairman of the Special Studies Department who make every effort to support us and our ideas. Our English Department chairman taught 099 once and has vowed never to teach it again. In fact, he once indicated on my faculty evaluation form that "Simply teaching 099 I consider meritorious service." He does recognize, to some extent, the problems we do face, is willing to assist us with our scheduling requests, and leaves most of the decisions concerning the running of English 099 to those of us who teach it.

Likewise, the Special Studies chairman generally defers to our judgment of various situations and often personally backs us up when we feel a student needs

counseling out of school and into viable alternatives.

This isn't to imply we instructors are coddled--far from it! But at least when problems arise, we have two people with some authority who will at least listen, if nothing else.

I find myself now in an awkward position. It's time for a conclusion--and, as we all tell our students, a conclusion should reemphasize the thesis of the paper without repeating the introduction.

Unfortunately, I have nc conclusion--except to say that as times change and enrollments change, we with the 099 program at West Georgia College have changed also. We've done our best to keep up with what is required of us by the state, and--in addition--we've added our own standards which we feel benefit both the students and our program's purposes.

None of us are entirely satisfied with what we do and are therefore always eager to hear what others who deal with developmental English have tried. That time is now--and conceivably could result in our discovering that English 099 can in reality be a "Mission Possible."

Thank you.